

i think i realized then what one of my roles in life would be: a helpless, quiet target for advice. and like then, ultimately i calmly accept it now. not long ago someone advised me to buy ant traps, and i did.

OUR TOWN

the house on the corner was old, and every morning when i walked by, on my way to work, i'd see a woman sitting in the window with a chicken in her arms. this woman had unruly red hair, as though in all her life she had never combed it. the chicken was remarkably calm in her arms; rarely did it ever move. at first i thought the chicken was dead, stuffed, but then one day i saw its head twitch and i knew it wasn't dead but very much alive. i remember telling my wife that the chicken was indeed alive, only she had trouble believing this like everyone else, and she told me that it would be all but impossible to hold a live chicken that long without it stirring up a fuss and trying to get loose. also we all knew that the woman's family was extremely poor, and that if the chicken was alive then it was very strange it wasn't looked upon as food. and besides that, the country was at war again, being very prone to throwing itself into battle at the slightest provocation, and most of the chickens had been slaughtered already and canned and sent to the front. the idea that this woman in the old house on the corner might be sitting in the window with a real live chicken in her arms was unthinkable, if not treasonous. walking past her window i'd purposely whistle some sharp tune, in an attempt to make the chicken move. at this i was successful only once, and when i was the woman looked at me with disgust almost, as though i had been fresh and had whistled at her. rumor had it that there was a plot in the works to kill this woman, so that the chicken could be removed from her arms and prepared to be consumed by the boys in our brave troops. nothing like this came to fruition though, and the years went by and the woman and the chicken continued to remain as fixtures in the town, a town which could never get over its confusion and irritation concerning this. then one morning the woman appeared in the window alone, without the chicken, and the town, well, it just simmered with juicy speculation. no one dared ask the woman though, as she sat there, serene, like a portrait of a member of the royal family. we were, every one of us, intimidated by her, even as there was suspicion that she had been party to the eating of the bird. then shortly after this she started sitting in

the window with a bowl on her lap, a fish bowl in which two goldfish swam endlessly about in monotonous patterns. but this new development didn't interest anyone: there was no mystery as to whether the fish were alive or not, and they certainly would not be a valuable source of nutrition and energy for our boys doing battle with an enemy who now seemed to be advancing on every side of us. it would take zillions of goldfish, we figured, to feed the troops; killing these two would be futile. in time people forgot about the woman with the unruly red hair, sitting there in the window with the fish bowl in her lap. some even stopped walking past the old house on the corner. most considered her insane. following her death, the goldfish grew old and died too. in the best tradition of the town they were bronzed, these goldfish, and they were sold to the enemy as good luck charms.

MY PRIZE POSSESSION

i take a skull of a dog and hang it up over the fireplace, right in the center, and there is nothing on the mantelpiece except a deck of cards which hasn't been used for over half a year, at least. there's nothing on the walls either, since the chalky white appeals to me more than any of the paintings i own. the rest of the farmhouse is the same way. the walls are empty and white and there is not much furniture, and even in the cabinets there are only a few dishes and a can of beans and a bottle with hardly any olive oil left in it. in the bedroom where i sleep there is a futon on the floor, which georgette's brother gave us to use at one time as an extra bed, and when she left she didn't bother taking it with her. now it is my closest friend. the bedroom across the hallway has a laundry bag in it, with some roots hanging on the one wall, which i found one day years ago down by the stream when i was working at the motel, for those five years after my marriage to eileen ended. to say that i like to keep things simple is no big revelation. and it's easy to do here too, being that there is so much room, so many rooms, rooms on the first floor and then more rooms on the second floor. a lot of rooms for one guy. the rare visitor is always jealous. when i moved here i wasn't alone, i was with g, but now circumstances have done what they've always done: they've changed, and the change has left me with many rooms.